

Opening Remarks at Fairness and Accountability Panel Discussion

January 26, 2005

Welcome to the Fairness and Accountability in Broadcasting Panel.

We are here to discuss, in a very short space of time, what is upsetting Americans every single day and night as they tune into their local broadcast stations.

It is what I call, the "dumbing-down" of America.

People all over America are asking: "When did the news stop being impartial?", "Why is talk radio so one-sided?"

"What happened to the standards of journalism?",,

"What can I believe anymore?"

A year ago, on a snowy night in Rochester, over 500 of my constituents came out to a town hall forum to talk about this very topic.

Some 200 people without seats remained for over 2 hours to express their dismay that they could no longer count on their local stations to cover important local issues - or accurate weather reports - or water main breaks - or Little League scores.

Why? Because most of our local stations are owned and managed by absentee landlords.

These mega-media corporations aren't beholden to the communities they serve.

They have one primary concern when determining what you see and hear in the media...their bottom line.

My constituents complained that critical issues of public importance were not being covered - or were appearing in such a lop-sided fashion that they- were unrecognizable as the truth.

Why?... Because station owners have forgotten that in return for the free licenses they hold to broadcast on the public's airwaves, they promised to uphold the public's interest.

They promised to be concerned with more than just the size of their wallets.

My constituents are mad -- I'll bet yours are too.

It wasn't always this way.

The precipitous decline in American broadcast standards started 15 years ago... when the Reagan Administration repealed the Fairness Doctrine.

Since that time we have experienced repeated abuses of the public trust...incidents that have shaken public confidence in the American media.

Our media focuses on what is exciting and what brings in viewers, not what is important.

It has become all about the *ratings*...All about the *money*...and about little else.

And if left unchecked, the problem will only get worse...

The "dumbing-down" of America will only continue.

In fact, the problem has become so pervasive that even Ted Turner, founder of one of the nation's largest media conglomerations, has spoken out about it.

In a keynote speech to media symposium yesterday, Mr. Turner stated that media consolidation was one of the top five things wrong in America today... because it limits the voices delivering the news...Which is especially critical when the country is at war.

His solution? He called for a return to the Fairness Doctrine, saying otherwise "there's no place to turn to ensure full coverage of the issues."

Advocates like Turner who are concerned about the truthful and balanced coverage of news and opinion make the point that often slips the mind of many broadcasters:

The public owns the airwaves, not the mega media corporations

Today, ground zero for what every American sees on television and in the news... is the boardrooms of 4 or 5 corporations.

They make decisions about content based not on fairness, not on balance, not on localism, not on diversity.

They make decisions based on the Almighty Dollar and their bottom lines.

Because in the absence of a fairness doctrine...the news has become merely a profit center and not a public service.

So let's talk about ensuring that broadcasters uphold their end of the bargain.

Tomorrow, I will introduce the **Fairness and Accountability in Broadcasting Act**, which will enforce the public interest obligations of broadcast station licensees to their local communities, and return the public airwaves to the people who own them.

It will promote diversity of opinion on issues of public importance, including local issues.

It will promote both competition and local control.

And it will ensure that radio and TV broadcasters are *accountable* to the communities they serve.

Specifically, it will reduce the license period for broadcast stations back to four years. Eight years of operating without any oversight, we have discovered, is a license to steal.

Second, each station shall be required to hold 2 public hearings a year to ascertain the needs and interests of the communities they serve.

Transcripts of these hearing shall be placed in a public file, on the Internet, and be forwarded to the FCC as part of the license renewal process.

Third, stations will be required to report to the FCC on a biannual basis how they have covered diverse opinions about issues of public importance and how their coverage reflects the interests and viewpoints of their local community.

And last, the FCC shall take into account any failure to hold hearings or ascertain the needs and interests of the community into account when license renewal rolls around.

It will no longer be enough for media companies to have profit be the only motive for how the news is covered.

The interest of the public must come first.

That's not too much to ask in return for licenses worth tens of billions of dollars. The American people want balance and debate.

The American people want accountability in the media and they want to be well informed on all sides of an issue...

...so they can make the critical decisions that affect their lives and the future of this democracy with confidence.

We must put common sense back into broadcasting.

Let's not quibble about how to define bias and unfairness.

Suffice it to say, we know it when we see it- and when we hear it. And I think we can all agree that we have seen and heard too much of it in recent years.

And likewise, we'll know, without being told, when fairness and balance have returned.

Now, to give you some background on what the Fairness Doctrine was, what it did and what it did not do, I'm pleased to introduce Mark Lloyd, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, and Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute.

Mark will also act as moderator for today's panel of experts. Mark?

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(End of Event)

Before we close, I'd like you to know that we have a way for our constituents everywhere to join this important debate about media content and responsibility.

By going to the web site <http://www.fairnessdoctrine.com/> , they can not only get information about the responsibility of broadcasters to uphold their interest, but they can also sign a petition to ensure that they do so.

We also have 3 upcoming events here on the Hill to announce, which will expand on the subjects we covered today in more depth. They are:

- 1) How do we solve the problem of media bias in the 21st Century? Is a new Fairness Doctrine necessary? The Center for American Progress and Media Access will arrange this event.

- 2) What is the impact of media consolidation on coverage of local issue? Free Press and Common Cause will produce this discussion.

- 3) Why does the market fail to ensure that broadcasters serve the needs of local communities? What would an ascertainment process look like in the 21st Century? The Center for American Progress will produce this event with Democracy Radio.

Dates for the discussions will be announced later. Please remember to sign the sheets in the back, so we can keep you informed about our important work to bring Fairness and Accountability back to broadcasting.

I am particularly grateful to the experts on the panel who have given us so much to think about today, and I thank you all for coming.